An economy of contradictions

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Introduction? Or conclusion?

Your future is fucked, screwed, threatened at the very least. Or at least it seems this way under a 21st century neoliberal market economy. It seems there is risk in everything, everywhere, for everyone. It seems that everything is dangerous, that all experiences and behaviours are symptoms. It seems that the current milieu of—and increased anxiety about—rising property rates, increasing poverty, rising debt, rising tuition fees, ongoing inaccessible health care, continued social service cuts, a worsening global climate, and, of course, steadily increasing disability rates effects us all. And all this is coupled with the increased salience of parental anxieties, particularly regarding middle- and upper-class children and their futures, concerning the effects of social media, video games, too much time spent watching television, on the couch, not exercising enough, not eating enough vegetables, not doing enough of a particular behaviour at a particular time, and so forth. In “Introduction to biopolitics, risk, and childhood” Nadesan (2010) points out that these children are also at risk of exposure to “risky children”, that is, poor and racialized children who are understood as “future welfare dependents or future criminals whose environmental or biologically mediated riskiness escapes remediation by the helping professions” and who “threaten to reject American values and the global, neoliberal economic order” (p. 3). Thus we arrive not just at childhoods “fraught with educational, cultural, and environmental risks that re-
quir[e] careful parental oversight from early infancy onward,” but, under a neoliberal capitalist market, we arrive “within the ambit of contemporary economic, ecological, and political catastrophes that threaten the viability of any future for humans” Nadesan, 2010, p. 2). This then, obviously and expectedly so, only intensifies middle- and upper-class parental anxieties about their children’s futures (Gil-Peterson, 2015, p. 183).

These escalating anxieties are then reflected in, and partially relieved by, the proliferation of toys and tools and methods and tricks and tips—what I categorize as biocapitalist enhancement instruments—marketed at middle- and upper-class parents, and that draw on normative biological, physiological, psychological, and behavioural conceptions of childhood growth and development. These instruments are marketed (quite explicitly) as a means not just to encourage and adjust children in alignment with varying and often specific standards of normalcy, but are particularly premised on the hope that using them (in their intended ways) will enhance, cure, fix, create, mould the clay that ‘is’ a child. More specifically, these instruments are intended to produce children in line with (and, in some cases, exceeding the expectations of) neoliberal futures, that is, into independent, productive, prosperous, and sometimes even super-enhanced adults (Fritsch, 2016, p. 14). The seemingly infinite plethora of instruments come in a variety of forms—apps, toys, foods, advice. Take the following few examples that are on the market, both physically and electronically (most of which I analyze in this paper): there are toys parents ‘should’ buy their children to help teach them to walk or talk or spell or write, glass tools parents ‘should’ switch to in order to avoid toxins from plastic and maximize health, foods parents ‘should’ feed their children to ensure ‘good’ vision and a brain that works ‘well’. All this to say, we have now arrived at another juncture, and a contradictory one at that. We have arrived at a point where an ever-expanding market of biocapital enhancement instruments encounters ever-increasing risk. Where further withering coincides with further capacitation. Where disability converges with always-more pathways to normalcy and normative futures. Where some disabled bodies do gain traction and a potential
for productivity through biocapitalist instruments. We have arrived at a place where disability comes face-to-face with amplified attempts to eliminate, prevent, cure, enhance, and normalize. And yet, disability and disabled bodies/minds invariably continue to flourish, numerically but also otherwise (Fritsch, 2016). It is at this juncture of elimination and proliferation that my analysis begins.

This paper explores the economy of contradictions put forth by and evident in the expanding market of these biocapitalist enhancement instruments, and, particularly, how understanding these contradictions has implications not just for how we come to understand childhood, disability, and the future, but also how this economy of contradictions has implications for everyone, as relational beings who are always interacting with and always requiring “an-other” (Fritsch, 2010, p. 5). I argue that, like the instruments that are both worthless yet marketable, useless yet profitable, fruitless yet proliferating, so too become disabled bodies/minds, disabled children/childhoods, and disabled futures within a 21st century neoliberal market economy. More specifically, I explore how reading the proliferation of enhancement instruments, in their prevalent, contradictory, and ultimately futile nature, on and against the proliferation of disability and disabled (children’s) bodies/minds not only provides further insight into the biocapital instruments themselves, but illuminates interdependency as a useful methodological tool to bring bodies into our analyses of objects and instruments. Ultimately, I show how using such an approach to understanding biocapital instruments enables us to more clearly understand our futures, disability, relationality, intercorporeality, as well as the urgency and inexorability of interdependency for everyone, within this contemporary moment but also always.

Elimination? Or proliferation?

“Disability is everywhere,” writes Rosemarie Garland-Thompson (2016) in her recent New York Times article “Becoming Disabled” (p. 8). She tells us that “1 in 5 Americans lives with a disability”, that “[t]he fact is, most of us will move in and out of disability in our lifetimes, whether we do so through illness, an injury
or merely the process of aging” (Garland-Thompson, 2016, p. 10). These sentiments are echoed by those outside the realm of Disability Studies and Critical Theory as well, becoming so familiar they become almost axiomatic, almost a Western cultural proverb. Take the following two examples. In November of 2016, Forbes Magazine published an article citing the World Bank, stating that “one billion people (15% of the world’s population) experience some form of disability, with one-fifth (between 110 million and 190 million people) experiencing significant disabilities” (Lee, 2016, p. 3). In 2007, Bob Wright, the founder of the autism advocacy organization Autism Speaks declared that “Every 20 minutes—less time than it will take you to drink your coffee—another child is diagnosed with autism. It’s much more common than people think, with one out of every 150 children diagnosed” (qtd. in McGuire, 2016a, p. 104). But disability is not simply flourishing. Rates of disclosing disability, diagnosing disability, becoming disabled, and/or self-identifying with disability/as disabled are not only increasing. Of most pertinence to this analysis is specifically how disability continues to flourish in spite and in the face of an increasing market of biocapital instruments aimed at encouraging and creating normative behaviours in line with neoliberal futures, particularly at the cost of the devaluation of disability and disabled bodies, and arguably as an attempt to eliminate disability through biocapital capacitation and enhancement—some of which measures I mentioned above. So already, at the outset, even prior to an analysis of the instruments themselves, we see their futility exposed. We see disabled bodies flourishing regardless of (and, as we will see in some cases, alongside and as a result of) biocapital attempts to eliminate. We see the instruments not working, not fulfilling their intended purposes to enhance, to normalize, to create bodies in line with neoliberal futures. What failures—inept and with nothing to contribute—these instruments seem.

Perhaps we can attribute the failure of the instruments to always and ‘successfully’ normalize bodies and minds to their (the instruments’) proliferation itself. To the fact that there are just so many ways to normalize: so many toys to teach children how to walk, so many ‘brain foods’ (foods that apparently ‘increase’ brain
function, or ‘aid’ in brain development), so many apps that “teach kids real-life skills”, that parents do not know what to choose, what products to purchase, which marketing tactics to buy into (Simone, 2013). Perhaps parents are choosing anything because anything is better than nothing--than disability. Perhaps parents are buying the most extreme of options in a quasi-fight-or-flight reaction against disability and the potential for disabled futures—even though, as Garland, Forbes, and Wright remind us, disability is inevitable and unavoidable (and thankfully so, but we will get into this later) (Nadesan, 2010, p. 15). Perhaps we can attribute the failure of the instruments to the impossibility to adequately and entirely secure white middle- and upper-class neoliberal futures, to their inability to “ensure a rigid dictation of performed action” (Bernstein, 1969, p. 11). Perhaps we can attribute this failure to the fact that “not all bodies are equally amenable” to the scripts of normalcy, to the fact that neoliberal futures are often not available to disabled people who are queer, poor, racialized, immigrants, and/or otherwise othered, to “risky” bodies (McGuire, 2016b, p. 78; Nadesan, 2010, p. 3). Perhaps this failure can be attributed to the fact that, under the current neoliberal market economy, capacitation is not a viable option for all because these othered bodies are always already understood as “wasted lives”, as always already waste products, and as always already “not the sovereign princes of futurity” (Bauman, 2004; qtd. in Fritsch, 2016, p. 22). Perhaps we can attribute the failure of the instruments to the fact that “the risks we face today are the ones that cannot be limited, are unpredictable, incapable of compensation, and finally incalculable” (Nadesan, 2010, p. 15). Perhaps the perpetual failures of the instruments to secure normative neoliberal futures and subsequently eliminate and/or capacitate (biocapital capacitiation cannot be separated from a logic of elimination) disability through curative, rehabilitative, and enhancing measures does not only reveal the impossibility to ever extinguish disability from the face of the earth. More, what is revealed is that, in spite of this impossibility to eliminate disability and thus the inevitable failure of the instruments, when parents are faced with the incessant potential for disability and “the possibility, albeit remote, of irreparable damage to their infants” and children, parents (particularly those already liv-
ing a version of a neoliberal life, and plausibly already holding the money and resources to do all they can to give their child the same), never refusing or abandoning the “perpetual hope of reaching meaning” or “futurity’s unquestioned value”, turn few places but to more instruments (Nadesan, 2010, p. 15; Edelman, 2004, p. 6, 4). Perhaps the instruments are not failures after all.

**Normalcy? Or disability? Independence? Or interdependence?**

Beyond the fact that the instruments that promote normative neoliberal futures are proliferating on the market concomitantly to the proliferation of disability and disabled bodies/minds, we must also account for the ways in which calling upon normative notions of growth and development in the instruments as a means to neoliberal futures is also to call upon, to anticipate, disability and disabled bodies/minds. Though this—an understanding that to evoke the norm is to evoke the other—is a phenomenon applicable to almost any analysis of power, which has been revealed time and time again (Edward Said, Judith Butler, José Muñoz, bell hooks, Audre Lorde), perhaps in this context it can lead us elsewhere, otherwise. Let us turn to the Fisher-Price Learn With Me Zebra Walker, a toy intended for children ages six months to three years old, and aimed at “teaching first words to encourage first steps” (Matel, 2016, p. 1). That is, it is a colourful toy that closely resembles a four-wheel walker, containing four buttons on the outer front that all prompt either a song or a phrase for children “to learn all about ABCs & 123s” as a means of encouraging “moving & grooving, helping little ones get even steadier on their feet!” (Matel, 2016, p. 1). However, analyzing the toy and the behaviours it invites more closely—or perhaps providing an alternative reading of the instrument—alludes to something much more unostentatious yet astonishing and “wondrously speculative” (Matel, 2016, p. 1; Gil-Peterson, 2015, p. 193).

More than the fact that to call upon normalcy (in the form of walking and talking as expected and encouraged behaviours) is also to *figuratively* call upon disability (in the form of not walking—sitting, crawling, stumbling, falling, lying—and not talking—muttering, stuttering, slurring, shouting, whispering, silence) to then
discourage it, the Learn With Me Zebra Walker actually and literally encourages these latter behaviours evoking (anxiety about) disability. First, the four buttons are on the side opposite to the handlebars, on the lower half of the toy close to the ground, meaning that to press the buttons the users either have to be: A) not using the toy as a walker while pressing the buttons, so they are sitting or lying or somehow rather close to the ground (disability!) in front of it, pressing them, B) the user is using the toy as a walker but someone else (intercorporeality/dependency!!) is pressing the buttons, or C) the user has very long arms (disability!!) and can reach the outside of the toy from its interior. Second, a section of the product description states: “And when babys [sic] learning to walk, the easy-grasp handle and sturdy 4-wheel base help [interdependency!!!!] steady those wobbly [disability!!!!!] first steps” (Matel, 2016, p. 1). One reading of this instrument and this statement is that the intention of the buttons and the toy itself is for children to eventually stop needing the instrument altogether: to outgrow it, surpass it, to walk independently and sturdily, to recite the ABCs without a prompt, and so forth. In this reading, even though the instrument is inviting the behaviours that can evoke anxiety about disability when they begin to move outside of ‘infancy’ (when a child continues to crawl past the desired age, dwells on the floor, when all of a child’s steps are wobbly, when a child cannot or chooses not to speak, or, not to speak ‘clearly’), the instrument only invites these behaviours insofar as it is assumed and expected that no dwelling will occur, and, that if a child does dwell, perhaps further measures should be taken. But this is not the reading I choose.

We have another reading where we recognize that, yes, it is undeniable that the intentions of the Learn With Me Zebra Walker, like most other biocapital enhancement instruments on the market, is to some extent capacitate children in line with neoliberal presents and futures, to teach them how to walk and talk independently—all behaviours/traits associated with normalcy. We must, however, remember several things, which I hope can provide a more complicated understanding of this toy as well as all biocapital instruments. If these are normalizing and enhancing instruments, then of
course not only are their intended consumers anxious middle- and upper-class parents, and their intended users these parents’ children, generally, but are particularly children who are not meeting expectations, who are not ‘progressing’, who are not ‘on time’, who operate on their own time (Kafer, 2013a, p. 26). These users are likely children who may or may not be disabled (under any definition of the term) but who perhaps resemble disability, whose behaviour stands out as non-normative and is interpreted as disability, whose delay evokes (parental) anxiety and the need for a cure. Not so much so that institutionalized measures are sought out, but enough to turn to any toy store, the grocery store, one must not even leave their house with easy access to the App Store, to the infinite supply of tips and tools and tricks and methods on the internet, to online stores where products can be easily and quickly accrued, where virtual and material realities muddle when a button is pressed and objects appear at doorsteps. Here, then, in non-normative and disabled children’s usage of the instruments, disability literally mixes with normalcy, delay meets efforts to speed up, disabled bodies intertwine with the biocapital instruments premised on neoliberal capacitation. The instruments shout disability’s name, claiming to hold the key to normalcy, though this is blurred when the key is often in the possession of disabled and non-normative children.

More, in an alternate reading we can also see how the instruments themselves require disability, depend upon its flourishing, thrive off of its withering (Fritsch, 2016). We witness not just the looming threat of and anxiety about disability being used as a marketing strategy, but we see disabled children’s bodies/minds as necessarily existing precisely so that cycles of production, consumption, and profit can continue. If there was no disability, if the potentiality for disability was occasional, rare, non-existent, then the corporations behind all these instruments would simply vanish, their market extinguished, their profitability gone, purpose eliminated, bankrupt, in debt maybe, operating at a deficit (words that likely bear familiar, though of course not true, for disabled people). Further, if total independence was accomplished, if dependency and relationality and intercorporeality and interdependency were forbidden, not allowed,
not fathomable or imaginable, then again, we would have no instruments. We must remember, after all, that the material items are at least plausibly produced in large factories, with multiple beings performing one part or several different parts, working in tandem with a variety of tools and gadgets and machines. It is important to note here that I would not necessarily categorize this work as ‘enacting interdependency’ or as a productive example of intercorporeality precisely because of the violence and exploitation often a part of corporate factory production. I am merely pointing out how these instruments cannot be produced in isolation. Even non-material instruments can be understood as having been conceived of, adjusted, and produced relationally, using some means of communication outside one’s body (a conversation with others, a team, employees, a phone, a computer) to put forth an idea, to ‘get it out there’. Thus, in this reading we have a role-reversal of sorts: one where dependency is understood not as existing solely in disabled bodies/minds but in the instruments themselves, where concepts like lack and unprofitability and non-productivity refer not to disability and disabled bodies/minds but to markets and corporations. In this reading, we can understand relationality, intercorporeality, and interdependency not just as enacted by and necessary for disabled bodies/minds, but for everyone, everything, always and all the time.

So perhaps what is of (market) value in this alternate reading is not actually the instruments themselves, their promised outcome (enhancement, normalcy, and ultimately neoliberal futures), the outcome itself (whether or not they teach children to walk and talk), or even any other benefit that may be found in consuming or using the tool, like fun and enjoyment. The products themselves do not matter. As Nadesan (2010) points out, and as I argued earlier, these instruments have already lost their intrinsic value because of their proliferation, because there are just so many things to choose from that everything at once becomes a viable option and waste itself (p. 14). What I am arguing here is that yes, these instruments are valuable (because their market continues to expand, because they continue to generate ridiculous amounts of profit, because people understand them to be valuable) but they are not valuable or profitable because
they ‘work’. They are valuable and profitable because “neoliberalism is driving the increased salience of risk” (Nadesan, 2010, p. 4). They are valuable because disability remains an always-loomng potential (read: threat), because parental anxieties and subsequent willingness are at an all-time high, because disability is flourishing, because relationality is relentless, because interdependency is inexorable, because disabled bodies, minds, and childhoods exist, because “there are ways of growing that are not growing up” and not everyone wants to be or can be ‘normal’ (Stockton, 2009, p. 11). So maybe, come to think of it, it is disability, and disabled (children’s) bodies and minds, in particular, that are valuable (and profitable) after all.

Let me take this one step further before moving into the final section of this paper. Nadesan (2010) raises the example of parents who are weighing the relative risks of whether to feed their children with glass or plastic baby bottles, and I want to explore this (p. 15). Though only briefly, Nadesan (2010) points to an interesting observation: that both plastic bottles and glass bottles are risky and potentially dangerous, both to children but also to anyone (plastic for its chemicals and pollutants, glass for its fragility, its potential for breakage, but also its hardness) (p. 15). Not only does this elucidate the ways in which—especially within a neoliberal market economy that finds risk in everything and capacitation through every means imaginable—there is no ‘right’ or single way to parent (neither plastic nor glass bottles provide a clear-cut and guaranteed pathway to reduced risk, normalcy, and subsequently neoliberal futures), nor does the plastic versus glass example merely point to the ways in which, as we have explored, not all ‘risks’ (read: disability) in themselves, as themselves, can be minimized through biocapital enhancement (Nadesan, 2010, p. 15). Instead what gets minimized are parental and cultural anxieties that arise in and are reflective of neoliberal interpretations of risk. But even more than this, Nadesan’s (2010) example corroborates the ways that, in an endless economy of risk, biocapital instruments can too be disabling and create disability, whether temporarily or otherwise: plastic can cause sickness and glass can cause injury. All this to say, while parents who are weighing the risks of plastic versus glass are assumedly already anxious about their children’s health,
well being, and futures, what they are confronted with when seeking to remedy these anxieties is not only more anxiety, but also even more—ever-more—potential for disability.

And so it seems we have again exposed the contradictory nature of these instruments, their simultaneous (perceived and monetary) worth and proliferation, their fruitless and futile nature, their normalizing and disabling potentialities. It seems the instruments frame disability and disabled bodies/minds as something to move away from, to eliminate, to capacitate, to enhance. It seems they put independence on a pedestal, as a necessary trait to ‘make it’ in this day and age. And yet somehow we all, the instruments too, seem only to be simultaneously and perpetually moving towards always-and ever-more disability and relationality, not in a forward motion but perhaps we are moving sideways, backwards, beside each other, beside an-other, and beside ourselves (Stockton, 2009; Fritsch, 2010). Maybe it is “a lateral contact of surprising sorts” (Stockton, 2009, p. 11). Maybe we are not moving at all. Maybe we are moving but in a motion that is unrecognizable, indescribable, a static version of motion, a moving version of static, a vexed motion of nothingness and everything and disability and relationality and disability and intercorporeality and disability and interdependency and always more disability. And though I believe this is productive, promising, propitious, others do not.

And so it seems we have not just exposed the contradictory nature of these instruments, but we have come full circle, back to the beginning of this paper. We have arrived back to the fact that if all these contradictions and complexities exist, if there is nothing to minimize risk, if risk is increasing, intensifying under a neoliberal market economy, if disability continues to evoke so much anxiety and threat that there is everything and nothing to do about it, what do we do with the future that remains unknown and unpredictable? We have arrived back to more disability, to one-in-five people, back to increased anxiety and an intensified willingness for parents to go to extreme measures. Back to exaggerated uncertainty and a lack of authority. We have nothing and everything and elimination and proliferation and value and futility and normalcy and disability, all
tangled together and mingling and mixing and dwelling. And it is at this place, this juncture of convergence and divergence, that I suggest nothing else except that it seems we have never needed each other, an-other, more.

**Conclusion? Or introduction?**

As I have shown, in understanding these biocapital instruments merely through a language of independence, in understanding these instruments merely as products aimed at producing normative neoliberal bodies, minds, childhoods, and futures, we forget about a whole other set of lessons that these instruments can teach us, a whole other world of uses and relationships and assemblages (Fritsch, 2010). A pedagogical world of wonder and relationality and reinterpretation and disability and imagination and intercorporeality and interdependency, all that is lost in a normative language of independence (Fritsch, 2010). A world I have hinted at by reading the tools through a disability lens, through a language of interdependency (which I pursue further in what follows), understanding that when there are intended bodies and intended uses, there are unintended ones as well, and these are not mutually exclusive but exist at once. The search for normalcy and independence clashes with disability and dependence and they mix, meld, mould into one another. When we move beyond an analysis of merely production and consumption, normalcy and disability, neoliberal futurity and no future at all, we miss everything in between, behind, and beyond. When we analyze the instruments without the bodies/minds that are using them, without the contradictions and complexities they each bring, without overlap and motions that might not make sense, we lose not just an understanding of other-ways disabled and non-disabled children and older people are already re-purposing these normalizing instruments, but, as a result, we also leave behind all of the value in these uses and all they can tell and teach us, everyone, about relationality, interdependency, and the futures we are all pressured into believing are fucked.

Think, for example, of the imagination, stereotypically thought of as blossoming in childhood, though I would argue otherwise.
Think of its beauty, its creativity, of the ways it can be presented with an instrument meant for walking and turn it into house, of the ways it can be presented with nothingness, with an empty room, and create outer space. Think of all of the reinterpretations of toys and instruments that certainly continue to be envisioned and carried out. Think of all of the creative re-uses that have been invented, that are being invited that we may not even notice until someone else does. Think of turning a pillow into a dog. Think of sharing one bite. Think of dreams, their whimsical and perplexing features, their nonsensical details. Think about all of the possible uses that extend far beyond the intended ones of the instruments, imaginary or not. Surely, many have been tested. Think about disabled embodiment. Think about a walker used not just as a toy but as a way of moving and being. Think about duality: a seat and a walking aid. A mobility device and a grocery cart. Think about using a glass bottle because of its feel, its design, its use as both hot and cold. Think about using something because you like it. Think about using something because it is the only one you have. Think about complexity, about moving outside of understanding instruments and tools and aids in terms of their practicality, their intended uses, for their intended purposes. Move beyond singularity and beyond straightforward relationships of utility and dependence.

While of course using biocapital instruments differently or otherwise is only an option for those who have access to these instruments as well as have the ability to experiment, what I am arguing for extends beyond the instruments entirely. What I am getting at here is the ways in which, as Fritsch (2010) argues, in theorizing about the relationships between bodies and objects (tools, aids, and, as I add, even biocapital enhancement instruments) not as merely “detached tools”, as independent things interacting on occasion, when necessary, but instead, as “relational connections of non-ordered organisms”, we can begin “to think through the different levels of desire circulating” in these relationships (p. 10, 9). If and once we expand our understanding of biocapital instruments beyond analyses of how they promote neoliberal futurities—*with and through* their normalizing intent—and simultaneously read these instruments
through actual bodies and bodily experiences, through a language of intercorporeality and interdependency, we can begin to understand not just how meaning and purpose and value exists beyond the price tag and the intention of the instruments, but it is here that we can come to know interdependency as necessary, relationality as unavoidable, and “intercorporeality as the fundamental structure of becoming-in-the-world-with-others” (Fritsch, 2010, p. 10).

It is here where we recognize that disabled and non-normative embodiment has repercussions and ethical implications for all beings, that the experience of embodiment is exposed as an always-relational, never-private affair for everyone (Fritsch, 2010, p. 10). It is here that the futility of biocapital instruments remains exposed, that normalcy and neoliberal futures can be understood as idealized and unattainable. That delay exists not just in normative understandings of disabled bodies, but in one of neoliberalism’s most treasured imaginaries: independence, because it will never be. It is here that the imaginary of independence is exposed as just that: an imaginary, a myth, where “The ‘I’ cracks into an-other and risks the autonomy it could never fully claim” (Fritsch, 2010, p. 10). And it is here, “at the limits of the self”, that in the midst of all this risk and chaos and contradiction, in the face of the futures that the current neoliberal market economy poses as fucked, screwed, threatened at the very least, that we must—for as we have witnessed we have no other viable option—choose not to “fuck the future” or all that it stands for and instead “find all others: other people, other species, and other forms of vibrant matter” now, in the present, in the past, in the future, always (Edelman, 2004; Kafer, 2013a, p. 31, Fritsch, 2010, p. 12).

References
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